

ABSTRACT

The Past We Are and Will Be: Nietzsche and Anzaldúa on Histories Without Ends

Current debates often appeal to the “right side of history” without questioning what history must be for this statement to carry force. Simultaneously, acknowledgement of histories of the oppressed provokes concern about the relationships between historical testimony, identity, and violence. Is history essentially progressive? Can historians encompass competing accounts within a unified narrative? Do we need new models of historical memory to bear witness to traumatic experiences that rupture the sense of a unified self? I trace this set of questions back to 19th century debates in philosophy of history and bring Friedrich Nietzsche’s contributions there into conversation with Gloria Anzaldúa’s writing to offer a new way of thinking historical identity . Nietzsche was concerned that secular historicism’s concept of progressive history imbued history with moral authority in the guise of a universal telos while regarding the past as a fossilized foundation for human action, both of which leave no room for ethical responsibility for the past or present. I argue that Nietzsche gives us an account of history that resists these tendencies while showing that history is created as we weave together the multiple histories we are and live within each moment. I deepen his view by drawing on Anzaldúa’s de-colonial autohistoria and trauma theory to further argue that reading and writing history are integral features of who we are as community members living in the aftermath of violence. The result is a dynamic concept of history that allows us to honor the multiplicity of inheritances contemporary selves perpetually grapple with through ethical engagement with the past and present. While I maintain that history does, in fact, make a claim upon us, I emphasize that this claim is not moral and absolute, but ethical and existential; we are not responsible to history, but for it, as the possibility we are.